



The Song of the Shears

A Song by J.B. Wilson©J.B. Wilson 1901

Click, click, click!

The fight has begun at last;

Click, click, click!

Don't make the pace too fast.

For those wethers kick and strain

In a most outrageous way,

And our backs will ache with pain

If we rush the kip to-day.

Clink, clink, clink!

I hear the glasses rattle

Clink, clink, clink!

In a different kind of battle.

And the landlord winks his eye

And says to himself "You bet,

They like to shear 'em dry,

But I like to shear 'em wet!"

Notes

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with the note "J. B. Wilson, Forbes. N.S.W. Worker."



TREASURE TROVE OF OLD NEWSPAPERS

Back in the days when Australians began to realise that they had a native Australian literary tradition... and the Bush Music Club was formed to research, collect, practice and perform our own songs, stories and poems, library research was a painstaking, process of poring over newspaper pages pawed by scholars of all persuasion ... lugging crumbling, fading sheets to the photo-copy queue and paying for images ... already another generation down the path to oblivion. All this had to be backed up with copious notes keeping track of place, date, source and associated background.

It was wonderful that our researchers managed to get what they did ... and a marvel that they breathed so much life back into traditions trampled by imported, commercial music. Of course, the next step that was so closely related to our Bush Music Club founders was that new technical marvel ... the expensive, massive, mains driven tape recorder that cost months of wages ... consumed your savings as if you were feeding the reels with pound notes ... but allowed directly recording the songs, music and verse of the old survivors of our outback and agricultural 'bush regions'. By lugging such technological behemoths about the 'Bush' collectors like John Meredith brought to light what had survived of an authentic tradition ... and assembled the mother-lodes of folklore that introduced many of us to Australia's real voice.

All this led many of the pioneer researchers off to slave to detail the Australian making (... or adapting ... or remoulding ...) of songs, tunes and words that sometimes were reformed in our new country ... but, in many cases, formed straight out of the native soil of our country, the struggles to build a fairer society, the lure of gold strikes and possible wealth, the struggles for fairer, more democratic world than what so many had left behind.

All this concern was to understand, record, characterise and validate the things that made our own culture something different from its sources – the ways that our new Australian temperament was an important part of our development of an Australian culture ... something reflected in all our utterances: songs, poems, music and dance traditions.

Now we are seeing new technology, in particular the National Library's Trove Database, that lets us see directly the way some of these songs first appeared ... before they were "collected" and anthologised. The electronic tools of the internet are being focussed on the past century or more of stored newspapers ... and web search tools let canny folklorists throw 'smart searches' - often distinctive phrases in 'target' folksongs and poetry.

Just lately, we have seen Mark Gregory use such 'smart searches' to find the earliest appearance in newsprint of what may have only been found as a collected song ... so we get much better dating of appearance (... and thus, ideas of true age – and source!)

The Bacchus Marsh Express

THE BARE BELLED EWE.

Oh, down at the catching pen an old shearer stands,
Grasping his shears in his long bony hands ;
Fixed is his gaze on a bare belled ewe,
Saying " If I can only get her, won't I make the ringer go."
Click goes his shears; click, click, click.
Wide are the blows, and his hand is moving quick,
The ringer looks round, for he lost it by a blow,
And he curses that old shearer with the bare belled ewe.
At the end of the board, in a cane bottomed chair,
The boss remains seated with his eyes everywhere ;
He marks well each fleece as it comes to the screen,
And he watches where it comes from if not taken off clean.
The "colonial experience" is there of course.
With his silver buckled leggings, he's just off his horse ;
With the air of a connoisseur he walks up the floor ;
And he whistles that sweet melody, "I am a perfect cure."
"So master new chum, you may now begin,
Muster number seven paddock, bring the sheep all in ;
Leave none behind you, whatever you do,

And then we'll say you'r fit to be a Jackeroo."
The tar boy is there, awaiting all demands,
With his black tarry stick, in his black tarry hands.
He sees an old ewe, with a cut upon the back,
He hears what he supposes is--" Tar here, Jack."
"Tar on the back, Jack; Tar, boy, tar."
Tar from the middle to both ends of the board.
Jack jumps around, for he has no time to sleep,
And tars the shearer's backs as well as the sheep.
So now the shearing's over, each man has got his cheque,
The hut is as dull as the dullest old wreck ;
Where was many a noise and bustle only a few hours before,
Now you can hear it plainly if a pin fall on the floor.
The shearers now are scattered many miles and far ;
Some in other sheds perhaps, singing out for "tar."
Down at the bar, there the old shearer stands,
Grasping his glass in his long bony hands.
Saying "Come on, landlord, come on, come !
I'm shouting for all hands, what's yours--mine's a rum ;"
He chucks down his cheque, which is collared in a crack,
And the landlord with a pen writes no mercy on the back !
His eyes they were fixed on a green painted keg,
Saying " I will lower your contents, before I move a peg."
His eyes are on the keg, and are now lowering fast ;
He works hard, he dies hard, and goes to heaven at last.
C. C.
Eynesbury, Nov. 20, 1891.

This is a great find from Mark Gregory (<http://folkstream.com>): the ancestral Click Go The Shears as titled by a country paper's typesetter ... without checking spellings! But it also dates the poem ... and subsequent song ... from the lead-up to the "Great Shearers Strike ... and the enigmatic credit to C.C. Eynesbury seems to suggest it comes from a sheep station in that area (Eynesbury, Victoria).

NLA Trove can be found at <http://trove.nla.gov.au>